



“ . . . in the Agora ”

At its March meeting, Sydney Branch discussed four motions moved by Sigrid McCausland and myself. Two of the motions focused on establishing the branches of the ASA as legal entities and restructuring the Society along federal lines. The other two were concerned with establishing a full-time office for the Society. These motions, as amended, and others, arising from the discussion, carried by the branch, have been placed on the notice paper for the BGM by the Sydney Branch Executive. What follows is an out-line of the ideas for a new direction for the Society, which is behind the motions I have proposed.

The comments made about the Council in the outline are not specific to the current members of Council. They are based on the impression which the various Councils have made on me in the twelve years I have been a member of the Society. What follows is a critique of the structure of the ASA, not of the individual Councillors who have been prepared to place their time and energy in the service of the Society.

There is a perception amongst some of the members of the Sydney Branch that the Council is a remote body whose activities are irrelevant to the life of the branch. For most active members, the branch is the centre of activity in the Society. Council's relatively infrequent meetings go largely unnoticed by most members, unless the branch executive makes a conscious effort to raise matters from the minutes. Council itself commented on communication in the Society as a problem in September 1987 and again

in June last year. The *Bulletin* reports Council meetings, the minutes are available on request, and there are, of course, the informal, social channels of communication, but these means do not seem to address the problem.

I consider the problem two-fold. First, there is no structural link between the branches and Council. There is no formal requirement for individual Councillors to report to the branches and no mechanism whereby the branches can instruct Councillors to raise matters at Council meetings. Secondly, the Council has the executive, financial and policy-making weight in the Society, although all the activity takes place at branch level under the direction of the branch executives.

I would like to see some of the weight shifted away from the Council to the branches and structural links between them established. The branches should be central in terms of executive and policy-making powers, where the activity is, not appendages to Council as they are now. This seems an appropriate time to consider re-structuring the Society. Most branches report regular meetings and activities. I notice all branches (except the newly formed Brisbane branch) discussed the draft corporate plan. This suggests there is a general feeling that the Society needs re-orientation, a new perspective.

Another factor which adds force to the need to reconsider the direction of the Society is the increasing significance of the Australian Council of Archives. Since the major institutions have decided to back the ACA, it seems likely to become the body which governments consult. The ACA will necessarily speak for the institutions, it cannot present the view of the *archivists* the way the ASA should. The ASA requires to carve out a particular niche for itself vis-a-vis the ACA, speaking more for people working in or generally interested in the archives field.

At branch level this is possible and necessary. Already the sort of activities organised by the branches addresses the needs of these people. If they don't, those activities are not supported. This process should go further. There are issues arising which I consider the ASA branches could respond to in a more public manner than they have till now.

For instance, in Sydney the amalgamation of universities and colleges will affect the ASA members working in affected tertiary institutions dramatically. I consider the branch should have a public view on amalgamation as it affects the records and archivists in the area, supporting the funding of the archival function in tertiary institutions. Generally, this kind of issue would be seen as the preserve of Council, but we cannot afford to wait on Council.* If the Society is to continue to have some relevance to archivists, this is the sort of issue which it should take up and to which the branches are much better placed to respond than Council.

Taking up such questions is something which can build up membership, as the intervention by the Society in the review of the Victorian Public

Records Office demonstrated. Building up membership, especially in the major institutions, is necessary if the ASA’s voice is going to be heard alongside that of the ACA. In the longer term the Society’s future lies more in acting as a lobby group in the archives heritage area. To do that we shall have to set up a full-time office for the Society, but that depends on increasing the membership to support it. Building up membership numbers is absolutely dependent on people’s seeing the ASA as relevant to them as workers in the field.

Changing the structure is not a magic wand, but having the formal responsibility for public comment on matters affecting archivists would encourage the branches to take more initiative. If they did take up such issues, this would in turn encourage newer members to participate more in the Society, to see it as something to which they can contribute and can help shape its activities. At present the control centred on the Council acts as a dead weight which discourages all but the most dedicated professional members from taking up activity beyond the routine of organising meetings and social events for the branches.

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***Editor’s note**

Since Anne wrote this piece the proposed amalgamations have been abandoned. The theoretical point – that the Society needs a mechanism for quick response to such matters – remains valid.

A.C.